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## CLIMATE CHANGE

# Climate Change Is Making Us Sick, Says WHO Envoy

By Busani Bafana



**The World Health Organization says round 7 million people die prematurely each year due to air pollution. Credit: Busani Bafana/IPS**

**BULAWAYO, Aug 2 2023 (IPS)** - Climate change is making us sick. It has become urgent to build resilient health systems to secure humanity's well-being, says the special envoy for climate change and health of the World Health Organization (WHO).

"Climate change is unquestionably affecting our health every day," says Vanessa Kerry— a renowned global health expert and medical doctor – who was appointed the WHO Director-General's Special Envoy for Climate Change and Health in June.

She has a tall order to amplify WHO's climate and health messaging and conduct high-level advocacy on tackling climate change to secure global health.

### Increasing Disease Burden

"The climate crisis is a health crisis," Kerry told IPS in an interview, calling for urgent action to mitigate and adapt to the climate challenge, which has increased the burden of disease around the world.

"Climate change poses a fundamental threat to our health. We are looking at the growing burden of disease, so urgent action is absolutely needed at this moment not only to address the pipeline of disease that is coming but to ensure that we can mitigate some of the causes of this poor health and adapt to the complex challenge."

According to the WHO, one in four deaths in the world currently is from preventable environmental causes. For example, around 7 million people die prematurely each year due to air pollution, which is more than the deaths during three years of COVID globally, Kerry said.

The WHO is already estimating an extra 250 000 deaths per year linked to climate change.

Climate change-induced extreme weather has spiked the incidents of infectious and communicable, and non-communicable diseases, while extreme heat has triggered a rise in cardiovascular diseases and mental illnesses.

Malawi and parts of Southern Africa have suffered serious cholera outbreaks. India faced health heat-related illnesses, a surge of malaria after the flooding in Pakistan last year, and a malaria outbreak in the United States, all linked to climate change.

Vector-borne diseases, including malaria, dengue, schistosomiasis, human African trypanosomiasis, Chagas disease, and yellow fever, are strongly affected by climatic conditions such as temperature, rainfall, and humidity. While water-borne and sanitation-related diseases, such as cholera, typhoid, and dysentery, are a major contributor to global disease burden and mortality, according to the WHO.

The World Meteorological Organization (WMO) forecasts a 90 percent probability of the El Niño event in the second half of 2023, which is set to trigger a rise in global temperatures and more extreme heat in many parts of the world and in the ocean, said WMO Secretary-General, Petteri Taalas.

“The declaration of an El Niño by WMO is the signal to governments around the world to mobilize preparations to limit the impacts on our health, our ecosystems, and our economies,” Taalas said.

El Niño – a naturally occurring climate pattern associated with warming of the ocean surface temperatures in the central and eastern tropical Pacific Ocean – occurs on average every two to seven years, and episodes typically last nine to 12 months.

The IPCC finds that there is a more than 50 percent chance that global temperature rise will reach or surpass 1.5 degrees C (2.7 degrees F) between 2021 and 2040 across studied scenarios, and under a high-emissions pathway, specifically, the world may hit this threshold even sooner — between 2018 and 2037.

According to the IPCC Assessment Report, climate change has adversely affected the physical health of people globally.



Furthermore, extreme heat events have resulted in human mortality and morbidity, while climate-related food-borne, water-borne diseases, and vector-borne diseases have also increased.

### **Health at COP28**

2023 is a crucial year for the intersection of climate change and health as the 28th Conference of the Parties of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), more commonly referred to as COP28, will hold a first-ever day dedicated to health at the climate change conference in the United Arab Emirates in December. This will serve as a critical opportunity to emphasize the profound significance of addressing climate change in relation to human health, Kerry said.

“My goal is to ensure our response to the climate crisis could be health-centered and try to mainstream it at COP negotiations,” said Kerry, who believes in promoting public understanding of the climate crisis as a health crisis that must be managed now.

“I think people tend to associate climate change with just one aspect of health, like infectious diseases. But the truth is we see climate change impacting pretty much every aspect of health, communicable diseases to non-communicable diseases,” she said.

The Paris Agreement of 2015 is seen as a public health agreement with the WHO highlighting that health considerations are critical to the advancement of climate action, and meeting the Paris Agreement could save about a million lives a year worldwide by 2050 through reductions in air pollution alone.

Kerry said, for instance, investment in reducing air pollution would save lives and prevent a future loss of almost \$50 trillion spent since 2010 in addressing this challenge.

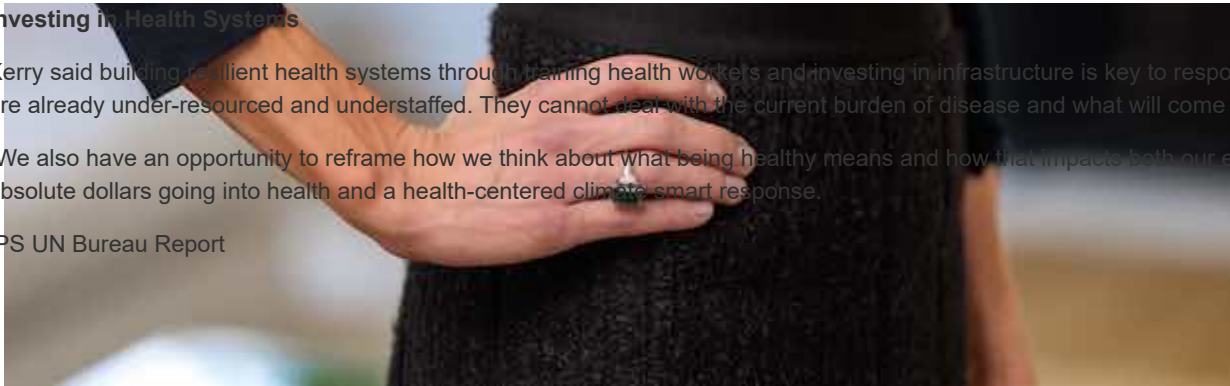
“We also have an opportunity to reframe how we think about what being healthy means and how that impacts both our environment and how we live,” said Kerry, stressing the importance of meaningful investment in stronger health systems and a workforce capable of meeting some of the climate burdens.

### Investing in Health Systems

Kerry said building resilient health systems through training health workers and investing in infrastructure is key to responding to climate change. Many health systems around the world are already under-resourced and understaffed. They cannot deal with the current burden of disease and what will come as the impacts of climate change grow.

“We also have an opportunity to reframe how we think about what being healthy means and how that impacts both our environment and how we live,” said Kerry, stressing the need for absolute dollars going into health and a health-centered climate smart response.

IPS UN Bureau Report



Vanessa Kerry. Credit: Seed Global Health



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